69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
Moi AM9
M'nong

and we were down to the nursing-mothers, who, removing their babies from the breast and passing them to onlookers, tripped lightly towards us. Although the rice-alcohol, with its queer burnt-cereal taste, was weaker than usual, my friends said, it was beginning to take effect. The Moïs had slipped into an easy-going joviality and the nursing-mothers received some mild familiarities, for which they exchanged good-natured slaps. Their capacity for alcohol, though, was greater than that of the elder ladies, and they were not to be deceived by a mere pretence of drinking on our part. Calling for beakers they sucked up the alcohol, spat libations, syphoned off liquor until the beakers were filled, and presented them to us. Taking stock of the situation we saw that we had drunk our way to within two nursing-mothers of those perfect young representatives of the Polynesian race, the chief's daughters, who flung us occasional glances from between sweeping lashes. But we were all flagging, dizzy with the alcohol and the stunning reverberation of the gongs. And the morning was wearing on. It would have been difficult to imagine our condition by the time we had drunk our way down to an interesting social level. The Moïs encouraged us with smiles and gestures, but we could do no more.

It was at a village in the vicinity of Buon Dieo, where two years previously an extraordinary affair had taken place. A family of eight persons were suspected of magic practices to the detriment of the village. According to local custom a representative was chosen as accuser and a trial by ordeal arranged. This consisted of the villagers' champion and the head of the accused family plunging their heads under water, the first to withdraw his head, in this case the accused, being held to have lost the day. According to the rulings of customary law governing this rather unusual case the charged persons were found to be possessed by certain minor demons, located in each case in a bodily organ. The general attitude thus was a sympathetic one. The prisoners were regarded

gilt and jewels. The wily merchants accepted all these kindnesses 439
in the hope of extracting great profits from their packet (1). 175*

1. Cf. Cabaton, op. cit. /Le Laos et les Neerlandais au dix-septieme siecle (1913). /

The audience took place near the pyramid of That-Luong which was entirely covered with gold plate. The king, surrounded by all his court, stood in a great temple and had the newcomers sit on mats under the gallery. The following day danses, combats and /574/ water jousts were given in their honor on the river bank. Souligna-Vongsa was present, carried on a golden chair, and came and sat on a /108/ balcony erected over the river. In the evening more than two hundred fiery pirogues went down the Mekong. "The river seemed to be on fire."

As time passed the merchandise sold well, thanks to the gifts distributed to the king, the princes, the princesses and the officers. The Dutch cleverly disparaged the Siamese of Ayuthya as traders of little faith, offered to settle a misunderstanding which had arisen between the sovereigns of Lan-Xang and Cambodia, and obtained the Laotians' promise to deliver them enormous quantities of benzoin and gum lac. They finally left on December 24, "profoundly impressed with the wealth and splendor" of the kingdom of Vientiane (1).

1. Van Wusthof left without his two assistants, whom he left with the king to await the gifts destined for Van Diemen and the Laotian "ambassador" who was to accompany them. (Francis Garnier, Bulletin de la Societe de geographie, 1871.)

If we are to believe Van Wusthof, this city then had a huge 174
population, while Luang-Prabang was nothing more than a deserted 164
city. A terrible cholera epidemic had decimated its population, 369
and those who were left had come to life in Vientiane.

He also confirms the kingdom's frontiers as stated by the Annals and the perfect relations which /109/ Lan-Xang maintained with all its neighbors.

On the other hand he does not shed any light -- rather the con- 439
trary -- on the obscure period which preceded Souligna's accession 643*
to the throne. Indeed he writes with perfect serenity: "the present 175*
king inherited the crown three years ago from his brother, who died

462 Tilling the ricefields, hunting, fishing and managing rafts and
241 pirogues take up about six months of the year. The rest of the time they rest and enjoy themselves. The status of women in Laos, although not as low and painful as that of other women of Asiatic races, is nevertheless not as pleasant as that of their husbands. In fact, all the petty farming tasks fall on them. They perform all the household labors, care for the poultry yard and the livestock, etc. They do the cooking, decorticate the paddy, go and fetch wood and water, spin, weave and dye cotton and silk, take care of the children, etc. Less [182] fortunate than her husband, the Laotian woman has no leisure except on holidays, and even then she has to make all the preparations without letting her daily occupations suffer.

142 Of ordinary height, generally well made and even elegant of
562 figure, the Laotian woman has a friendly face and is not without either grace or coquetry before her marriage. This does not mean that there are no homely girls, but these are rather an exception. As she grows older and worn from bearing children the Laotian woman loses much of her early grace, but in spite of everything she retains her joyousness, her high spirits and her very pronounced taste for celebrations when there is singing and feasting.

862 Laotian mothers worship their children. They take great care
858 of them and often push their weakness for their children to such a point as to prolong the period of breast-feeding, often beyond the child's fourth year.

342 Dwellings. Like all the representatives of the Thai family, the
574 Laotians inhabit houses which are rectangular in shape and are always raised one or two meters above the GROUND on piles. Wood and bamboo, in the form of beams, framing members, rafters, door and window casings, partitions, doors, windows, floors and shingles, are used to build houses, without the use of any nails, all joints and assemblies being fastened together with rattan.

The dimensions of the houses vary greatly and depend on the number of families that they are designed to shelter. Verandas with roofs which are sharply inclined and come down quite low are placed around the house, mainly on the south and west, to temper the heat of the sun and serve as a vestibule, a reception hall or a workshop. The family stays there during the day, as on a sort of neutral ground where people who are coming and going can be received without transgressing custom, which decrees that no one except members of the family and close friends shall have access to the inner apartments, which form the private home of the house's inhabitants.

to get something which is above the head of someone else. A polite person realizes that it is very impolite to touch the head of another person, even that of his closest friend. To hit someone over the head with the mak kok is a very grave offense. The mak kok, which signifies olive, is a fist formed in such a manner that the middle finger sticks out beyond the other fingers. To point out an object with one's foot is the gesture of a very crude person. A polite person always avails himself of the index finger of his right hand to point out something to someone. 576 /826/

On a visit.--When one arrives at the house of a Laotian one walks very softly and greets in the Laotian manner. If the owner of the house /973/ extends his hand, one should greet him in the European manner. Once in the living room one must wait till one is told "Sit down" before sitting down. The polite person asks his guest to sit down immediately after the exchange of greetings. 574 576

When you enter the house of a European, never walk in stealthily the way you do with a Laotian. The European would think that you had come to stab him. You should walk in such a way that he can hear you, without, at the same time, stamping on the floor with all your strength because you would, in so doing, frighten the master of the house. Before entering, you must knock on the door quite forcefully; then you must wait till you are told: "Come in!" or till someone comes to open the door for you. The Laotian visitor does not dare knock on the door for fear of committing an impoliteness, but he coughs outside the door.

In the living room the master of the house has arranged all the furniture in a certain way. When you are invited to sit down, you should do so without moving the chair that is designated to you. If you are offered a cigarette, you may refuse politely if you do not not smoke. If you do smoke, you should accept it. You will notice that there are ash-trays in the room. Use them. Do not drop the ashes from your cigarette on the table, the chair or on the floor. /353/

To receive something from a superior, the polite Laotian extends his right hand supported by his left hand.

Visiting the sick.--When one of our acquaintances has fallen sick, we must inquire about him by paying him a visit. If one is prevented from doing so by something important, one can have a 734

734 friend take one's place.

Laotians when they pay a visit to a sick person, prattle noisily,
574 ask the sick person a great number of unnecessary questions, and
576 sometimes tell him stories to cheer him up. This custom must stop. The patient, who is tired, needs rest. The visit one pays him should not last longer than ten minutes.

574 Condolence visit.--The Laotian ceremony connected with
576 the condolence visit is the opposite of the Western ceremony. The
764 The visitor, instead of appearing sad before the family of the deceased, is gay and smiling.

In order to give you an idea of what goes on in a house in which a death has taken place among the Laotians, I shall content myself by citing here certain passages from my article, "The custom
764 of funeral ceremonies in the land of Laos" (1): "Those who believe
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1. In Kinnary, No. 4, November, 1946.

in the existence of the phi place a tray of food intended for the deceased near the coffin. Furthermore they place, at the head of the coffin, a sword marked with a cross with chalk, together with a superstitious formula in order to prevent the phi from stealing the coffin away from the deceased. The coffin has to be watched over day and night. The watchers talk, play certain games, or engage in any other diversion. /274/

/825/ "In the course of this watch cats are also prevented from prowling around the coffin. A cat which were to jump across would provoke the resurrection of the dead person, according to what certain people say.

"The house in which the person has died is called heuan di (happy house). There one works, sings, dances, and plays. From it can be heard the sound of orchestras and shouts of joy. Such spectacles have something disconcerting about them to the eyes of strangers. Nevertheless, one should not regard this behavior as a sign of irreverence towards the deceased person. Despite its smiling appearance, the family of the deceased suffers profoundly. It abstains from violent shedding of tears and from public lamentations because it considers a discreet grief more dignified and the sense one has of death in this way a nobler one."

/779/ It would be difficult not to respect this tradition which stems

from the Buddhist religion; but there is reason, in my opinion, for 764
banishing all that is in the domain of superstition. 574

European custom, in contrast, permits the person in mourning 576
not to receive the visitor in the house of the deceased because he is
too afflicted. In this case the visitor leaves a card with a few words 000
of condolence.

If the person in mourning comes to receive the visitor, the latter should assume a sad air and he must not speak of the dead person first. This visit is paid out of sympathy for the family which is in mourning. It should not last too long because grief requires solitude.

Duties of the visitor. --On this subject I advise the adoption of the French custom:

The visitor dresses properly and in a correct manner. If he is wearing a coat and a hat, and carrying an umbrella and a cane, he puts them off before knocking on the door. He greets the lady and the master of the house before the other persons who are present. If the latter are too numerous he is not obligated to shake hands with everybody. It will be enough if he nods his head a couple of times to the right and to the left.

He takes his leave by shaking hands with the lady and the master of the house. In order to salute the other people present he performs the same movements as at his entry. If the number of people present is too large he may skillfully slip away; that is what is called loi vat angkit in Laotian ("to take French leave").

Duties of the host. --Here again my preference is for Western customs:

The host, when he sees his guests coming, appears before them to welcome them. After the exchange of greetings he designates the seats and invites everyone to sit down. When everybody is seated, somebody enters; he extends his hand and everybody rises to greet him. A lady does not get up to return the greeting except in the case of a personage of /975/ note or of a venerable old man.

The hostess and the host must appear affable and smiling during the whole time of the reception. When somebody takes his leave they accompany him to the door.

At a gathering. --At a gathering it is the duty of everyone to

naturally be "water." These two elements, opposed though they are 593
to one another, nonetheless go together. If you should happen to 647
raise your voice, see to it that it does not reach the ears of your 565
neighbors who will be sure to laugh at your domestic misunderstanding.
There is a good way to appease your anger: that is to go out and get
some fresh air. A moment of distraction will calm your irritation.
This precious and effective remedy is called, according to a Laotian
expression, "to caress one's heart with a hand drenched with fresh
water."

On a walk and on a visit.--Formerly it used to be considered 574
a disgrace for a mandarin to go for a walk by himself or to visit minor 647
functionaries. Nowadays this is no longer the case. A Laotian 565
Minister goes out alone without being accompanied by the traditional 178
retinue. He visits all classes of society without being criticized for
it by anyone at all.

At a private gathering.--In contrast to the customs of former
times, present-day mandarins accept the invitation of a simple
citizen. The host very often organizes various diversions: dances, /533/
lamvong, orchestras, songs etc. The Ministers willingly participate /535/
in these; they sing, dance, and pay their respects to the phousaos
while they mingle with the crowd. Certain Laotians whom I consider
backward criticize the liberal manner on the part of our Ministers.
Our great mandarins are their own masters. Let them turn a deaf
ear to these carpings. /978/

Honor Laotian Women

Some people consider the Laotian woman as an inferior 562
creature.

Certain women, it appears, are not permitted to eat with
their husband. Miserable husbands! You consider then that your
better half is like an animal?

Certainly, tradition says: "The woman must sleep with her /513/
head lower than her husband's. She must go to bed after him and
she must get up before him. The husband must have eaten three /264/
mouthfuls of rice before the wife can begin to eat in her turn."

These counsels of our fathers are valuable, but they are far
from indicating that the woman is inferior to the man. They recommend,